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## Managing Transition from First Language to English Medium Instructions (EMI): Students' Perspectives on Issues Encountered and Ways to Facilitate

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### ABSTRACT

English Medium Instruction (EMI) is gaining popularity worldwide due to globalization and the internationalization of higher education. In line with this tendency, many countries have introduced English medium study programmes, which have created challenging conditions, mostly in Asian and developing countries. However, little research has been conducted to discover the drawbacks faced by students and possible remedial measures for such difficulties, especially in contexts where English is taught as a foreign or second language. Therefore, the study aimed to ascertain students' perceptions of their difficulties and possible remedial measures. The study was done with a sample of 168 L1 university students pursuing their undergraduate studies in English medium. The data were obtained through a questionnaire on a five-point Likert scale administered online using a Google Form. The results analysed quantitatively indicated that students perceived their difficulty in understanding lectures (Mean= 3.73), comprehending modules/handouts (Mean= 4.03), participating in classroom discussions in English (Mean = 3.82), and facing assessments (mean=3.91). The study has revealed that students' limited vocabulary is a paramount barrier in their EMI lectures. As for remedial measures, students have responded most positively by allowing students to record EMI lectures, making the English language teaching programmes of the degree programme compulsory, increasing the number of subject-related books (English medium) available in the library, and making the English language teaching courses more focused on English for Specific Purposes (ESP).

### 1. Introduction

The development of the English Language Teaching (ELT) field has been enhanced by nations worldwide's acceptance of English as a global and universal language. By now, many nations use English as their first and second language and as an international or foreign language. In most contexts, English has functioned as a "lingua franca," facilitating communication worldwide. There is an unprecedented demand for education conducted in the English medium at global levels due to the recognition placed on English and the development of modern technology. The demand for study programmes conducted in English in the higher education sector is increasing at national and international levels. Abdulhafidh [1] points out that in fields such as medicine, engineering, politics, economics, and international relations, English plays a major role and has become a medium of instruction

at universities. Balan [2] believes that the demand for the English language in higher education and research over the last decades is assumed to be "a parallel and unavoidable process resulting in improved international academic communication worldwide." Graddol [3, p45] emphasizes that the provisions facilitated by the growth of English-medium education in developing countries have allowed them to reposition themselves as experts in educational services. It is well-known that Asian countries and developing countries have changed most of their study programmes to English mediums in the higher education sector.

The increased importance of English Language education and education through English has been developing worldwide, resulting from the global spread of English. Higher education institutes worldwide have been subject to the

internationalization of their study programmes. This is a major trend in global higher education to attract international students. Hence, higher educational institutes (HEIs) are keen to internationalise curricula to stage a global presence.

Universities have formed their study programmes to the concept of internationalization by setting up branch campuses in other countries, staff and student exchanges, collaborative degree programmes, and courses and initiatives to recruit international students and staff [4 p4]. She further states that higher education institutions in non-native English-speaking countries have initiated the transformation of their study programmes into English Medium instruction (EMI) courses and programmes for non-language subjects to internationalize and strengthen their global competitiveness. Jenkins [5] further reiterates that many universities have switched to conducting study programmes in English medium in their drive to internationalize the programmes so that they would recruit more students and staff from outside their national borders. It has been observed that universities that conduct their study programmes in their respective local languages (L1) rather than English are diminishing. The state of English in higher education has further been highlighted by [6]. He pointed out that 8000 courses were being taught in English medium in non-Anglophone countries in 2016 and asserts that it is most likely that this number may have grown substantially since 2016. Meanwhile, Times Higher Education, a British-based HE magazine, reported in September 2017 that in the eight years until then, there had been a fifty-fold growth in the number of English-taught bachelor's courses in continental European universities, from just 55 in 2009 to 2,900 in 2017 [7].

The importance of English in higher education has been proved through various changes in the global sector. It is a fact that English has been the key to academic collaboration through research activity, events, and communications both inside and between institutions themselves. The position of English as a lingua franca of higher education is met with more positive responses than negative ones, and academics are now working in massive higher education systems in non-English countries to this effect. The emergence of English Medium Instruction (EMI) as a field of research and study in the global education sector is proof of converting study programmes from native languages to English in non-English speaking countries. According to Dearden [8], EMI is a growing global phenomenon in all education and educational settings. The academia of EMI has been at an alarming rate, and universities worldwide are rushing to offer both undergraduate and postgraduate programmes in English medium [9,10,11,12]. The developments such as EMI, English

as a lingua franca in higher education, internationalization of higher education through English medium education, recruitment of foreign graduates, the opening of university branches worldwide, offering split degree programmes, organization of international conferences and seminars and publication of books, magazines and study materials both print and electronic version in English are factors that contribute to the place of English in the higher education sector globally.

In multilingual and bilingual countries where English is not the first language used, English Medium Instruction (EMI) is dominantly prevalent [13]. However, EMI is a highly favoured and competitive language policy matter in most countries in their educational reforms, even though the body of evidence on education favours mother tongue education over English medium instruction in primary education.

In Sri Lanka, most universities have envisaged EMI as beneficial in responding to the internationalization of higher education and facing challenges in the global economy. However, for many students in the Sri Lankan higher education sector, switching from L1 to English medium instructions is still a challenging task as students study using L1 during school education. This condition is not very much applicable to students who received school education in English medium. Further, Macaro et al.'s [13] systematic review of 83 EMI studies that investigated university teachers' and/or students' beliefs between 2000 and 2015 in different geographical areas found virtually that in all studies consulted, the most often expressed concerns were student's English language proficiency, the lecturer's ability to teach in English, or both, which created a barrier for students' comprehension. In Sri Lanka, lecturers resort to translation, code-switching, or code-mixing to remedy learners' EMI lecture comprehension. Also, a reason may be given for students to answer questions in their L1 at the examinations. This condition would jeopardize students' ability to answer questions in English and not prepare them with the required linguistic competence for their future careers.

Considering the difficulties of transition from L1 to EMI, this study aims to examine students' learning in English medium, focusing on identifying factors students perceive as hindering their learning and what pedagogical strategies and practices students suggest that could facilitate and support their learning. The research questions this paper endeavours to answer are:

- (1). What difficulties do university students encounter when they study in the EMI context?

(2). What perspectives do students have to overcome their difficulties in the EMI classrooms?

## 2. Literature review

There is speculation among EMI proponents that EMI lectures do not differ significantly from L1 lectures. They express that teachers hardly experience differences between performing teaching and didactic skills in English and their L1 [14,15]. However, it has been reported that EMI adds a layer of difficulty to students' learning, as students have to comprehend specialist subject matter through an L2 or foreign language with which they may not be familiar. Klaassen [14] perceives this condition as increasing the complexity of the transfer of the subject matter, and Lei & Hu [16] assert that it is a burden on the study. Research on second-language lecture comprehension research has pointed out that listening in academic lecturing for many university study programmes varies compared to day-to-day social conversational listening. In academic listening, unlike in social communication, students need to possess the background knowledge relevant to the subject discipline, mental agility for the degree of lengthy stretches of academic talk, and the ability to integrate the incoming message with information derived from handouts or textbooks [17]. Hence, it can be argued that EMI lecture comprehension techniques and learning are different from L1 as the medium of instruction. Therefore, lectures conducted in the English language for students whose mother tongue differs need a different lecturing pedagogy and approach to meet students' learning needs, focusing on their difficulties.

### 2.1 The nature of EMI

Using the English language in the classroom to teach academic subjects to students whose first language is not English can be considered English Medium Instruction (EMI). According to Dearden & Spain [18], in EMI courses, the delivery of content, interaction in the whole class, the materials used in learning, and the demonstrations and assessments of learning outcomes such as presentations done orally, assignments given or tests administered should be done in the English language. In the EMI context, other languages (L1) may be used in specific circumstances, for instance, student-to-student interaction and teacher-to-student interaction during classroom activities, to aid mutual comprehension and idea generation. However, students should be asked to present their discussions and outcomes in English. Further, the lecturer has to maintain at least 70% of classroom communication in English.

Dearden [19] has found that the concept of EMI does not confine its spread to higher education, but secondary education was also widely accepted, most

probably under top-down pressure from universities. Scholars [20,21] in education have pointed out that the scope of EMI pedagogy does not include an aim "to teach English" and merely the subject content is taught through English.

English Medium Instruction (EMI) is increasingly prevalent in multilingual countries where English is not the first spoken language [13]. In the case of primary education, mother-tongue education is mostly favoured over English medium instruction as mother-tongue instruction leads to improved cognitive development [22], positive test scores in education outcomes [23], and improved downstream human capital formation indicators such as adult literacy, and completed years of schooling [24]. Nevertheless, in most countries, there is a tendency for an early transition from mother-tongue instruction to EMI [25]. According to Brock-Utne & Holmarsdottir [26], one of the important reasons applicable to favour EMI in early primary grades by parents and teachers is the belief that academic attainment is directly related to the time of exposure to EMI.

### 2.2 Learner-centred Pedagogy in EMI

EMI has brought numerous pedagogical dilemmas and constraints for teachers of EMI. One such issue is that the teachers have to transform their monolingual lectures into English medium instructions. Another is that teachers are challenged with difficulty in applying EMI in their pedagogy, resulting from the students' low standard of English language, their diverse needs and abilities, and individual preferences for constructing and reconstructing content knowledge. Further, there are adequate instances where the competency of the English language teachers is relatively poor for them to conduct lectures in English medium. In learner-centered pedagogy in EMI, what is more concerning is the low standard of the English language learners, which would deter students from learning the subject taught.

Consideration for students' needs and abilities and individual preferences for constructing content knowledge are the considerations for learner-centered pedagogy. According to Baeten et al. [27], lecturers prioritise students' understanding rather than rote mastery of content subjects in learner-centered classrooms. Although in the literature about higher education, the term is not always used with consistent meaning [28,29], many authors have agreed that accompanying monologic lectures with interactive and innovative teaching methods improves learner engagement, critical thinking, Motivation, and content learning. In addition to the above, as Ismailov et al. [30] point out, conceptualizations such as reciprocity, collaboration, active learning, clear evaluation purpose and

processes, engaging learners in real-world problems, encouraging critical thinking, stimulation of student interest and Motivation, learner control and autonomy, helping student construct new meaning through relevant activities, and using dialogic teaching to support visible learning and student-student interaction are some of the important identifications in learner-centered pedagogy.

Though a learner-centered approach can potentially increase EMI students' success and satisfaction rates, there have been limited attempts in the literature related to EMI to inquire into learner-centered pedagogy [30] systematically. Dearden & Spain [31] have highlighted the critical role of language in content courses, stating that for EMI courses, the delivery of content, whole-class interaction, the learning materials, and the demonstration and assessment of learning outcomes should be in English. Use of other languages, such as the mother tongue, may be allowed in a principled and limited way in specific circumstances. However, students should be asked to present their discussion outcomes in English. Further, lecturers must confirm that at least 70% of the class communication occurs in English.

### 2.3 Difficulties that EMI creates for students

EMI brings students different challenges in comprehending lectures and textbooks/course materials in addition to classroom discussions and taking tests and examinations.

As students' native language is not English, they are confronted with difficulty comprehending lectures, which is one of the major difficulties in EMI classrooms. Such students are not satisfied with the knowledge they have gained when the English language is used as a medium of instruction [32,33]. The poor listening comprehension skill of the EMI students is a major drawback to grasping important points delivered in a lecture. Furthermore, students with incompetent speaking skills in English may find it challenging to clear up their confusion in the subject matter by asking questions. Also, a lack of competency in speaking skills prevents students from joining classroom discussions on the subject. Ibrahim [34] perceives that failure to read effectively can result in a low level of comprehension of notes/modules given by the lecturers.

Taking tests and exams is another important challenge for EMI students. Al-Bakri's [35] research also reveals that most participants have difficulty comprehending exam questions. Similar findings can also be found in a study by [36]. EMI students in these studies mentioned that they could not understand or misunderstand the questions thoroughly. As a result,

they cannot answer the questions even if they gain sufficient knowledge in their mother tongue.

### 3. Methodology

The research was conducted at the Rajarata University of Sri Lanka in the Faculty of Management Studies. The university is located nearly 220 km away from the main capital of Colombo. Most students followed their studies in their mother tongue, Sinhala or Tamil. However, undergraduates in the Faculty have to follow their study programmes in English medium right throughout the degree programmes.

The study is a survey and was conducted using a quantitative approach. Survey research can be defined as the collection of information from a sample of individuals through their responses [37]. Pinsonneault and Kraemer [38, p77] define a survey as a "means for gathering information about the characteristics, actions, or opinions of a large group of people." The strength of the surveys is the capability to obtain information from a large sample of the study population. The researcher believes it justifiable to select a survey design as the study population is rather extensive. Many researchers [39,40] have highlighted the benefits of surveys to a large population as an accessible approach.

The data collection was done using a strategic approach, using a questionnaire. The questionnaire comprised two sections, Part A and Part B. In Part A, data about difficulties faced by students in EMI classrooms were obtained with 14 questions under four sub-variables: (1) Difficulties in comprehending lectures, (2). Difficulty in comprehending course manuals/handouts (3). Difficulty in participating in classroom discussions, and (4). Difficulty in facing tests and examinations. Part B of the questionnaire included 10 questions under the variable, 'Attitudes for remedial measures,' where student perceptions of suggestions for remedial measures for difficulties were obtained.

The data were collected online using a Google Form and distributed among the target respondents. The data was analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS, IBM Version 21) software, and descriptive statistics were used. The study used a five-point Likert scale to measure variables ranging from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree: Strongly Disagree (1), Disagree (2), Neutral (3), Agree (4), and Strongly Agree (5).

### 4. Results

In this section, data obtained through the questionnaire have been interpreted and discussed under the two major variables: difficulties faced by students in EMI classes and student perceptions towards the remedial measures.

#### 4.1 Difficulties in comprehending lectures as perceived by students

Regarding the difficulties in comprehending lectures in Part A, the average mean value of the five sub-variables, as indicated in Table 1, is 3.73. According to the five-point Likert scale, this value indicates a fair difficulty in comprehending EMI lectures. In the analysis of sub-variables under Part A, the respondents agreed with the statement, "I have difficulty in understanding new vocabulary, terminology, and subject-related concepts explained in the lectures," with a mean value of 4.52 (SD .966). This value indicates a relatively strong agreement with the statement of difficulty. The second variable, "I have difficulty taking notes during English lectures because of the lecturers' pronunciation and speed of talking," had a mean value of 3.63 (SD 1.011), which is comparatively lesser than the first sub-variable but indicates it was somewhat tricky. The respondents have indicated their agreement with the 3rd sub-variable, "I have difficulty in understanding lecturers' instructions and explanations in English," with a mean value of 3.61 (SD 1.057), indicating a fair difficulty. The 4th and the 5th sub-variables, "I have difficulty in understanding the content of the lectures taught in English" and "I have difficulty in understanding lecturers' instructions and explanations in English," have values, Mean= 3.51 (SD .986) and Mean= 3.42 (.936) respectively. Hence, even the 4th and the 5th sub-variables indicated a reasonable difficulty regarding the difficulty level.

#### 4.2 Difficulties in comprehending course manuals/handouts as perceived by students

The following variable of the study was the perception of difficulty in comprehending course manuals and handouts given in EMI classes of major subjects with three sub-variables. The data revealed that the average mean value of the three sub-variables was 4.03, according to Table 2. Therefore, the mean value indicated an agreement between students for the three statements, and the results depict a considerable difficulty level in comprehending course manuals/handouts.

The analysis of responses to the statement of difficulty, "I find it difficult to understand the meaning of new words (vocabulary) when I read course modules or handouts," possessed a mean value of 4.30 (SD .948), indicating a rather higher difficulty level for the respective sub-variable. The next statement, "I have difficulty in understanding course modules and handouts as I find it difficult to understand the grammar used," had a mean value of 3.92 (SD .971), less than the first sub-variable. However, as per the data analysis, this value indicates a considerable difficulty level in students'

perception. Similarly, students measured the third statement of difficulty, "I find it difficult to get the meaning of modules or handouts due to the complex sentence patterns used," with a mean value of 3.88 (SD 1.001), which indicated a considerable difficulty level.

#### 4.3 Difficulties in participating in classroom discussions as perceived by students

Table 3 reveals the descriptive data of student perception towards participating in classroom discussions. The average mean value of the three sub-variables was 3.82, indicating a reasonable difficulty level regarding participating in classroom discussions. As indicated in Table 3, an analysis of the three sub-variables; "My low level of English language competency is a barrier for me to express subject knowledge in discussions," "Poor speaking skills prevent me from speaking in the classroom with others in discussions," and "My language barriers discourage discussions and interactions between lecturers and students" had almost close mean values, 3.89 (SD .965), 3.81 (SD .947), and 3.78 (SD .909) respectively. The three mean values indicate a fair difficulty level to the statements perceived by the respondents.

#### 4.4 Difficulties in facing tests and examinations as perceived by students

Table 4 depicts the data analysis pertaining to difficulty in facing tests and examinations as perceived by students. The average mean value of the three sub-variables of facing tests and examinations was 3.91, which indicated a formidable level of difficulty. Out of the three sub-variables, the first variable, "In examinations, I am unable to write answers in greater detail as I have a limited English vocabulary," had a mean value of 4.03 (SD .999), and the respective mean value showed a considerable difficulty level. The rest of the two sub-variables, "Since I have a poor command of English, I find it difficult to write answers more accurately," and "I find it difficult to understand the questions properly due to my poor comprehension of the instructions," indicated mean values 3.90 (SD 1.017) and 3.82 (SD .869) correspondingly. Therefore, the respondents perceive the second and the third statements as having considerable difficulty values but slightly below the first statement.

#### 4.5 Attitudes of students towards the proposed remedial measures

Part B of the questionnaire with ten sub-variables focuses on the student attitudes toward possible remedial measures that the lecturers and the educational institutes could implement to overcome the difficulties posed by the EMI lectures on students (Table 5). The respondents strongly agreed to the

remedial measures; "Encourage students to record lessons and study further," "Make English language improvement programmes compulsory," "Create more resources in the library for students to study the subject content materials/books," "Lecturers should ignore mistakes of English language of the answer scripts of tests and examinations (Not serious mistakes)," and "The English language improvement programmes should focus on subject content-based (ESP /content )teaching" proposed in the questionnaire with respective mean values of 4.18 (SD .842), 4.17 (SD .811), 4.16 (SD .806), 4.16 (SD .873), and 4.14 (SD .801). Data analysis further revealed the sub-variables; "Grouping weak students with bright ones and encourage group discussions on the content of subjects," "The Faculty has or organizes remedial English classes for weak students," "Teachers should use their Mother tongue (Sinhala/Tamil) to a certain extent in the English medium lectures," and "Lectures have to provide handouts with more details on the content of the subjects so that students can read and study" had mean values, 4.01 (SD .942), 4.01 (SD .977), 3.96 (SD 1.048), and 3.94 (SD .839) respectively indicating respondents' agreements to the remedial measures to a greater extent. However, the respondents disagreed with the remedial measure, saying, "Lectures should create more opportunities for students to speak and use more English in the classes," with a mean value of 2.81 (SD .947).

## 5. Results and Discussion

The study sample included 168 respondents who pursued their undergraduate studies in English medium. The sample had nearly 5% of students whose mother tongue is Tamil, while all the others were Sinhalese students. Data analysis revealed that students face difficulties in all four major variables. The respondents perceived comprehending course manuals /handouts as the most difficult area in EMI lectures and facing tests and examinations as the next area of difficulty in the study programmes conducted in English. Though students have rated difficulty in comprehending lectures at a lower level than the other major variables, further analysis revealed that students face severe challenges in understanding the new vocabulary of the subject matter used in the EMI lectures. Students face the same issue of limited vocabulary knowledge when they read handouts and course manuals and answer the assessments given.

Students' responses towards the remedial measures proposed in the study questionnaire reveal valuable information regarding the EMI lectures. As presented in Table 5, students have responded most positively to the remedial measures: allowing

students to record EMI lectures, making the English language teaching programmes of the degree programme compulsory, increasing the number of subject-related books (English medium) available in the library, and making the English language teaching courses more focused on English for specific purposes (ESP).

Apart from the above measures, the respondents have agreed positively to all the other remedial measures, such as encouraging mixed-class group discussions, using the mother tongue sparingly by the lecturers, providing comprehensive handouts, and organizing remedial English classes for weak students. However, the respondents disagreed with the remedial measure of creating opportunities for students to use the English language in class.

## 6. Conclusion

The study seeks to discover the perceptions of undergraduates of the sample university pursuing their studies in EMI classrooms regarding difficulties faced and remedial measures proposed. The findings from the quantitative data analysis suggest that their limited vocabulary capacity is a considerable barrier to comprehension of lectures, reading, and comprehension of handouts, answering tests, and doing assignments given. Hence, students' limited vocabulary is a major concern in EMI classrooms. In the case of remedial measures, students expect more flexibility and lecturing with L1-supported teaching in places where comprehension is crucial. Interestingly, students indicated the need to receive learner-friendly handouts with flexible English language to read and understand them even after lectures.

Since the study has a limitation in the research sample and the questionnaire, it is recommended that further studies be conducted on a larger scale with a variety of research instruments combined to gain a deeper insight into the nature of EMI and possible solutions for difficulties faced by students. Additionally, student perceptions of pedagogical skills on the part of lecturers are also a direction for further studies.

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**Table 1: Difficulties in comprehending lectures**

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
I have difficulty understanding new vocabulary, terminology, and subject-related concepts explained in the lectures.	90	1	5	4.52	.966
I have difficulty in taking notes during English lectures because of the lecturers' way of pronunciation and speed of talking.	90	1	5	3.63	1.011
I have difficulty understanding the lecturers' instructions and explanations in English.	90	1	5	3.61	1.057
I have difficulty in understanding the content of the lectures taught in English.	90	1	5	3.51	.986
I have difficulty understanding the lecturers' instructions and explanations in English.	90	1	5	3.42	.936
Valid N (listwise)	90				

**Table 2: Difficulty in comprehending course manuals/handouts**

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
I find it difficult to understand the meaning of new words (vocabulary) when I read course modules or handouts.	90	1	5	4.30	.948
I have difficulty in understanding course modules and handouts as I find it difficult to understand the grammar used.	90	1	5	3.92	.971
I find it difficult to get the meaning of modules or handouts due to the complex sentence patterns used.	90	1	5	3.88	1.001
Valid N (listwise)	90				

**Table 3: Difficulty in participating in classroom discussions**

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
My low level of English language competency is a barrier for me to express subject knowledge in discussions.	90	1	5	3.89	.965
Poor speaking skills prevent me from speaking in the classroom with others in discussions.	90	1	5	3.81	.947
My language barriers discourage discussions and interactions between lecturers and students.	90	1	5	3.78	.909
Valid N (listwise)	90				

**Table 4: Difficulty in facing tests and examinations**

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	St. Deviation
In examinations, I cannot write answers in greater detail as I have a limited English vocabulary.	90	1	5	4.03	.999
Since I have a poor command of English, I find it difficult to write answers more accurately.	90	1	5	3.90	1.017
I find it difficult to understand the questions properly due to my poor comprehension of instructions.	90	1	5	3.82	.869
Valid N (listwise)	90				

**Table 5: Attitudes for remedial measures**

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Encourage students to record lessons and study further.	90	1	5	4.18	.842
Make English language improvement programmes compulsory.	90	2	5	4.17	.811
Create more resources in the library for students to study the subject content materials/books.	90	3	5	4.16	.806
Lecturers should ignore mistakes of English language of the answer scripts of tests and examinations (Not serious mistakes).	90	2	5	4.16	.873
The English language improvement programmes should focus on subject content based (ESP /content) teaching.	90	2	5	4.14	.801
Grouping weak students with bright ones and encourage group discussions on the content of subjects.	90	1	5	4.01	.942
The Faculty has or organizes remedial English classes for weak students.	90	1	5	4.01	.977
Teachers should use their Mother tongue (Sinhala/Tamil) to a certain extent in English lectures.	90	1	5	3.96	1.048
Lectures have to provide handouts with more details on the content of the subjects so that students can read and study.	90	2	5	3.94	.839
Lectures should create more opportunities for students to speak and use more English in the classes.	90	1	5	2.81	.947
Valid N (listwise)	90				